

**Pardes from Jerusalem - Weekly Parsha Podcast –**  
**Parshat Korach**

***This podcast episode is sponsored by Pardes Seminar alumna Winter 2015 Dr. Julie and Glen Kohl in memory of her beloved in-laws, Lenny and Laurel Kohl z"l.***

**A teaching on the spiritual malady that Korach's argumentative personality introduced into the nation of Yisrael, its source and the spiritual practice we need to cultivate to bring healing.**

I will begin this parsha podcast with a teaching from the *Netivot Shalom*, Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe, d. 2000 in Yerushalayim:

It is taught in the Holy Zohar that Korach's argumentative behavior threatened peace and unity. The deeper cause and root of Korach's divisive approach with others is excessive egocentricity. This trait can grab such a strong hold on an individual that it defines a person's character when engaging with others. While the symptom is the unfortunate breakdown of peace and unity, the source is an obsession with one's ego. This obsession consumes all the space in one's mindset and heart, so much so, that everyone else bothers and disturbs this type of person, whereby everyone else mentally and emotionally stands in this person's way. Even though the "other" may not harm the person in any noticeable way, due to this trait of egocentricity, the person harbors the feeling that the "other" disturbs him, bothers him and occupies his own personal space. This feeling births the argumentative posturing.

Peace and unity derive from the very opposite, from the trait of humility and a non-exaggerated, even diminished, sense of self. This practice, *bitul yeshut*, does not minimize the worth of the person, but rather minimizes the amount of space a person needs to feel his self worth. It's really about gently moving out of our own way and making space for something greater than our limited ego – our inner being, our spiritual center. This can only occur when the individual yields oneself to that which is infinitely greater - to one's Creator, the blessed Divine Presence within each one of us. Then the person naturally and with ease defuses the danger of an exaggerated ego. Consequently, the presence of another individual neither bothers nor disturbs him nor becomes an obstacle along his path. In fact, and most importantly, the person can now connect with many more people and live with others in peace and in unity.

Egocentricity is the source and root of all the other evil behavioral traits. As we learn in Pirkei Avot, Chapter 4, Mishnah 21/28: "Jealousy, lust, and seeking honor remove a person from this world." These traits deplete a person's energies, strengths and vitality. Their source lies within the self-absorbed and self-centered individual, manifesting predominantly the trait of arrogance.

Korach was flawed, deficient and damaged by this trait of arrogance, whose source was his self-absorbed personality. **This** is why he brought fragmentation, separateness and divisiveness to the nation of Israel. Korach challenged whatever sense of peace and unity existed among the people. Actually the thrust of his arguments focused on his efforts to sabotage the spiritual practice of *bitul yeshut* – the minimizing and diminishing one's sense of self rather than magnifying it. Indeed it is *bitul yeshut* that creates and nurtures peace and unity.

The *Netivot Shalom* continues that the reason Korach challenged Moshe's authority with such vehemence and passion was due to Moshe's unique ability to cultivate the trait of humility like no other. The Torah declares in Numbers 12:3, "Now Moshe was a very humble man – *anav me'od* - more than anyone else on the face of the earth." Moshe's exemplary and distinguished trait of humility, his ability to diminish his sense of his ego, completely contradicted Korach's opposite trait of egocentricity.

The opposite parallel cannot be over exaggerated: Korach's self-centeredness, his *yeshut* – was the source of all the other evil behavioral traits that harm a person's mindset and heart. Likewise, Moshe's selflessness and sense of being in service to his Divine calling, clearly much greater than himself, his *bitul yeshut* expressed by his humility, includes within it all of the good traits that a person may develop. It is clear then why Korach was incredibly bothered, challenged and made to feel ill at ease by Moshe.

In this vein, the Zohar further points out that Korach's argumentative and divisive nature carried over to his approach with the Holy One Blessed Be He. For any person who brings fragmentation to peace – *Shalom* - likewise brings fragmentation to the very name of God, since God is also referred to by the name *Shalom* (*Shabbat 10b*). The ego – *yeshut* – becomes a divider that separates the Jew from encountering God's presence. Only through *bitul yeshut* a Jew is able to sense closeness to HaShem. This is especially the case with regards to the spiritual damage caused by arrogance, which results from egocentricity and self-absorption. As the Sages teach in Sota 5a, "Regarding one who is arrogant, The Holy One Blessed Be He proclaims that I and he are unable to dwell together."

Among all the negative character traits, we do not find any as severe as arrogance, which resulted in HaShem making such a strict statement that He and the arrogant person cannot dwell together. Korach indeed fell with the spiritual malady of self-centeredness and arrogance. Due to these harmful traits, he separated himself from the nation and from the very presence of God, who is referred to as *Shalom*.

The Piaseczna Rebbe, the Aish Kodesh, addresses this self-centered behavior in his sefer *Tzav v'Ziruz*, his personal diary and reflections on his spiritual journey. In entry 45 he first brings a teaching from the Baal Shem Tov that reconciles an apparent contradiction between two verses, one following the other. As Moshe Rabeinu is retelling about the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai, followed by reciting the Ten Commandments, in Deuteronomy 5:4 he proclaims, "Face to face did HaShem speak with you on the mountain, from amid the fire." He then continues in verse 5, "I was standing between HaShem and you at that time, to relate the word of HaShem to you..." The Piaseczna teaches: "It is taught by the Baal Shem Tov on this second verse that Moshe was not actually referring to himself as having stood between HaShem and the people, as this would have contradicted the encounter being one of "face to face." Rather the "I" here refers to the person's sense of selfness, his "I-ness", his *anochiut*", which a person feels within himself, worrying about and pursuing only his own needs. THIS is what stands and separates between HaShem and you."

The Piaseczna then teaches, in light of the Baal Shem Tov's interpretation of "I – *Anochi*": "To diminish the sense of self-centeredness and exaggerated sense of I-ness, the only remedy is found through the love of one's fellow. Never though when he becomes a separate entity unto himself. This is the hinted meaning in the verse of "I stand – *anochi omed* - when the "I" stands by itself then it is between God and you (*the you in this case is the soul of the person, the higher consciousness of the person, the beyond ego consciousness of the person*). Therefore the technique to reduce and even banish this magnified selfness – *anochiut* – from one's heart, which causes pain, fragmentation and disconnection, and feeling distant from God, is through connecting with other holy souls, being together in unity, by practicing love of one's fellow, so that each one should care for the other like one's own self."

In conclusion, I would like to invite you to consider cultivating two spiritual practices that are able to remedy the inclination to become self-centered, self-absorbed and arrogant – traits found within each one of us as part of the human condition. They involve practices that direct us both internally as well as externally:

1 – The inner work, following mindful contemplation and self-reflection, is to dedicate and commit yourself to a belief, to an idea, to a project, or to developing core values that are greater than yourself. By that, I mean gently move away from focusing on the “me” to now focusing your energies on the “we.” The “we” in traditional practice is the relationship between the Divine Creator and yourself, the created being. Channeling our creative energies, our passions and our feelings towards nurturing and strengthening the “we” is the inner work that weakens the ego’s incessant demands to always be in the spotlight. Rather than attempting to destroy, God forbid our ego, this internal work helps us channel the ego-based urges and desires to further our own sense of the Divine within. This practice becomes a wonderful opportunity to honor the privilege of possessing free will, the will to remain faithful to our inner selves, as each one of us carves out our own path. This transforms into the foundation for authentic spiritual living.

2 – The outer work, again, following mindful contemplation and self-reflection, is to direct your energies and focus on all of God’s creations, beginning with your fellow human being, moving towards the animal kingdom, continuing towards how we engage with the vegetable, fruit and green kingdom, and concluding with how we even treat our planet - the minerals, the soil, the water – the inanimate kingdom. Practicing random acts of kindness with all of the Creator’s creations is perhaps the most effective and healthiest way to shine the spotlight on that which is greater than our limited sense of selfness. Again, this becomes a radically amazing opportunity to honor, embrace and express your authentic true selves with the rest of the world around you. As the Piaseczna was known to have taught, “The greatest act that you can bestow to the world is to do someone else a favor.”

Both practices become the remedy to heal the brokenness of the Korach within us - the fragmentation we all experience within ourselves and with the world at large. These practices result in achieving and encountering more unity, more wholeness and a true sense of peace – within oneself and with the world we live in – as we increasingly encounter the Divine – *Shalom* - in all areas of our lives.

May we all merit to do exactly this! Shabbat Shalom U’mevorach.